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As I've watched the Presidential debates the past few weeks, I've been wondering: Which is the greatest issue facing us today? As we draw closer to the election of a President, we have heard much discussion about many issues—from the economy and jobs to international relations and peace to caring for the environment. It's difficult to select the most important, isn't it? They are so interrelated, for all the issues affect our lives. How does one select the greatest?

I imagine the question is as difficult as when Jesus was asked, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" If you think of just the Ten Commandments, what would you suggest is the most important one? ...

We might have a hard time answering that question today, but during Jesus' day the selection of one teaching would have been even more difficult, for within the first five books of the Bible, rabbis had discerned 613 commandments. The list included everything from food regulations to purity

laws to how to get along with others in the community. Keeping track of all 613 would have been a difficult challenge!

The question about the most important commandment was probably asked to try and trap Jesus, for in answering it someone would have probably been upset about his prioritization of laws—it's not easy keeping everyone happy! I imagine Jesus pausing for a moment, thinking through all the scriptures he learned as a boy, shifting through the Jewish tradition passed down through rabbis. The crowd may have begun to get uneasy, shifting back and forth, wondering how Jesus would reply to the religious leaders.

And then Jesus offered his answer: "The first is, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Those listening would have recognized this text, for it came from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, a teaching so important

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that they had it posted on the doorposts of their homes. Even today Jewish homes may have a mezuzah mounted on the doorframes of their homes containing these words about loving God, which serves as a reminder of God's presence each time they enter or leave their homes.

I think having a reminder to love God each day is a great idea, for just imagine if the first thing we saw in the morning reminded us to love God. How might your day be different if you thought about God the first thing in the morning? What's the first thing you usually say in the morning?

A few years ago, a radio station ran a contest. Disc jockeys invited their listeners to tune in their clock radios. "Just for fun," they said, "when you wake up to the sound of FM-106, call and tell us the first words you spoke when you rolled out of bed. If you're the third caller, you'll win \$106."

It didn't take long for the contest to grow in enthusiasm. The first morning, a buoyant disc

jockey said, "Caller number three, what did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?" A groggy voice said, "Do I smell coffee burning?" Another day, a sleepy clerical worker said, "Oh no, I'm late for work." Somebody else said her first words were, "Honey, did I put out the dog last night?" A muffled curse was immediately heard in the background, and then a man was heard to say, "No, you didn't." It was a funny contest and drew a considerable audience.

One morning, however, the third caller said something unusual. The station phone rang. "Good morning, this is FM-106. You're on the air. What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?"

A voice with a Bronx accent replied, "You want to know my first words in the morning?"

The bubbly DJ said, "Yes, sir! Tell us what you said."

The Bronx voice responded, "Shema, Israel...Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord

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is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Then the radio announcer said, "Sorry, wrong number," and cut to a commercial.¹

These are the same first words that Jesus offered as the most important ones to remember. Would it be so difficult to remember God first thing in the morning, or to say words that remind us to love God with our entire being?

After Jesus replied to the crowd about the first thing to remember about loving God, he offered a second thought: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," which he quoted from the book of Leviticus 19. Several centuries earlier the famous Rabbi Hillel had suggested this same teaching as the most important in response to someone who asked him to summarize all the teachings while standing on one foot.

Interesting, this teaching, often called the Golden Rule, is central to most world religious traditions.²

- From Islam: None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.
- From Hinduism: Do not to others what ye do not wish done to yourself, and wish for others too what ye desire and long for, for yourself.
- From Buddhism: Make thine own self the measure of the others, and so abstain from causing hurt to others.

Loving others seems to be central to all our religions; something so basic, and yet not always easy to do. I recently read a writer reflecting on the words of the early 20th century English writer, G. K. Chesterton, who

once said that the really great lesson of the story of "Beauty and the Beast" is that a thing must be loved before it is loveable. A person

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must be loved before that person can be loveable. Some of the most unlovely people I have known got that way because they thought that nobody loved them. The fact of the matter is that unless and until we feel ourselves loved, we cannot love.³

It's not always easy to love those who challenge us or push our buttons—something that parents often experience. The other day while sitting in the doctor's office with my daughter, a mother and her elementary-age son and two-year-old daughter came into the waiting room. The mother and the son were busy doing something on their smart phones, and the little girl was obviously bored. The girl tried to get a drink of water but couldn't reach the water fountain. When she asked for help and got no response, and she then stated, "I have to go to the bathroom." The only reply she received was,

"Come over here and sit down." Recalling my own years with two-year old children, I knew that sitting still is not something two-year-olds enjoy doing. As the little girl continued to move around the room, I realized that all she probably wanted was to be noticed by her family more than the cell phones in their hands. The most basic thing we need in life is to be noticed...to be loved.

But even when we feel unloved, even when we find it difficult to love one another, our trust in Jesus reminds us that God loves us no matter what. God notices us and loves us every day. May this wondrous love from God inspire you to notice others, and to love them even when it's not easy.

¹ Anonymous, Sermons.com

² See www.interfaithresources.com/interfaith-golden-rule-poster.html or www.scarboromissions.ca/Golden_rule/index.php

³ Donald B. Strobe, Collected Words, www.Sermons.com